

LOOKING FORWARD IN MONTGOMERY



GAZETTE FILE PHOTOS

Successes, challenges and the future: A final word from outgoing councilmen

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Outgoing County Councilmen Howard A. Denis, Thomas E. Perez, Steven A. Silverman and Michael L. Subin each brought different leadership styles and agendas to the County Council.

This month they will take their unique

personalities along with 38 years of combined experience on the council with them as they depart. Before leaving, the four reflected on the county and the challenges they are leaving behind for a new council, which takes office Monday. The forecast for the years ahead includes many unknowns, including a county budget that must balance increasing demands for social services, transportation and a well-

educated workforce.

How well the new council and the new county executive will cooperate to address those challenges remains to be seen as the county prepares to follow years of consistent development with an era of leadership adamant on slowing growth.

CONT

LOOKING FORWARD IN MONTGOMERY

Departing councilmen size up new scene

COUNTY

Incoming council

With Republican Denis gone, the council will consist solely of Democrats working alongside County Executive-elect Isiah "Ike" Leggett. Leggett (D), a former county councilman and Howard University law professor, takes over after 12 years of leadership from County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D). Heading up the council will most likely be long-time incumbent Marilyn J. Praisner (D-Dist. 4) of Calverton.

"I think the county is in great hands. These are two of the steadiest pairs of hands in the county," Perez (D-Dist. 5) of Takoma Park said about Praisner and Leggett.

"[Praisner] will be strong on the issues, and also in helping redefine the council's relationship with the school board," said Denis (R-Dist. 1) of Chevy Chase.

Perez said the council needs "to get back to the basics" by repairing the public trust in the planning process and guaranteeing an effective Board of Elections.

Silverman (D-At large) of Silver Spring noted the small differences in council members' approach to the budget.

"I think you've got a clear fiscal split," he said. "The difference between the fiscal conservatives and the fiscal liberals on the council for the past four years has been at most \$10 million out of a \$4 billion budget."

Silverman said he expects "a pretty collaborative process between Ike and the council, given that that's what he came from."

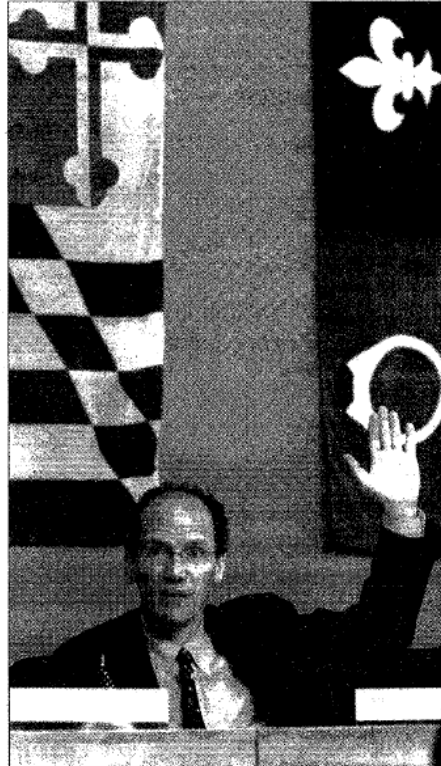
The biggest increase in next year's budget will be from new contracts negotiated with the school system's three employee unions, Superintendent Jerry D. West, county employees and police, Silverman said.

"Where that's going to play out is when Ike puts out his first budget because that's where the debate gets joined," he said.

Leggett

Leggett is a popular county leader, but he has been criticized for his measured leadership style. His four former colleagues figure his style will serve the county well.

"Ike will be a principal spokesman across the state. I have no doubt about Ike's leadership. This is a guy who's stared down the barrel of a gun in Vietnam. Pessimists who criticize Ike are missing the mark," Perez said. "He can have teeth of iron when he needs to. He does things his own



way, and that way should not be mistaken for weakness," Denis said.

Subin and Silverman noted the stylistic differences between Leggett and Duncan and said it will take time for the relationship between the new executive and new council to develop.

The questions, Subin said, are, "How's all that going to mesh? Where's the balance of power going to lie?"

It will take time to see what kind of executive Leggett will be, said Silverman, who lost to Leggett in the Democratic primary.

"Ike's been out of government four years," he said. "It's a different county government than it was even four years ago. I am confident that he will do the right thing."

Growth

According to state Planning Department projections, the county's population, which stood at almost 930,000 last year, is expected to reach 1 million by 2010, the final year of the new council's first term.

One of the new council's most important actions will be a review of the county's growth policy, which sets limits on development. The council relaxed that policy — which is reassessed every two years — in 2003, allowing for more development in some areas.

The growth rate, which boomed under Duncan, has slowed with a downturn of the housing market. Growth remained one of the main



GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

(Clockwise from left) Thomas E. Perez, Michael L. Subin, Steven A. Silverman and Howard A. Denis will leave the Montgomery County Council this year, leaving behind 38 cumulative years of council experience. Their last council session was Tuesday. They agree for the most part that the county is in good shape, but each sees room for improvement for the next council, which will be sworn in Dec. 4. The new members are Roger Berliner, replacing Denis in District 1; Valerie Ervin, replacing Perez in District 5; and Marc Elrich and Duchy Trachtenberg, replacing Silverman and Subin in the at-large field.

Affordable housing

In Montgomery County, growth and development are intertwined with affordable housing. There is only space in the county for about 75,000 to 100,000 units. Planning Board Chairman Roy Hanson said earlier this month that the current growth rate only adds about 5,000 new affordable housing units a year.

As the population increases, so do the residential demands of a larger workforce. The new County Council and executive will have to address these demands quickly in order to keep the county's teachers and public safety employees in Montgomery, Silverman said.

themes during the County Council and county executive campaigns, but the outgoing councilmen downplayed how big an impact the council can have on growth.

"I think the economy will determine the growth rate more than any tinkering with the annual growth policy," Denis said.

Silverman, who led the effort to revise the 2003 policy, has maintained that the county's growth rate is sufficient and a slowdown could lead to problems.

"Unless there is some magic solution that someone's going to come up with to provide resources, we're going to find ourselves stuck in the same traffic congestion that we're stuck in now, four years from now," he said.

CONT

COUNTY

"I think the biggest opportunities are really in the area of public land that's available, where we can negotiate better deals and higher numbers of affordable and middle-class housing," said Silverman, who was disappointed in the slow pace of the council's affordable housing efforts.

As available land decreases, prices for limited housing units increase, pricing out many county residents.

"We're always going to have a shortage of affordable and middle-class housing in this county," Silverman said. "Where we can have the biggest impact that will transform our community is focusing on early childhood."

Education

Spending on schools increased by more than 90 percent and accounted for almost half of the county budget during Duncan's tenure.

The school system is moving in the right direction, said Subin, a five-

term councilman who has headed the council's Education Committee through two decades.

"The next frontier" is closing the gap in achievement between some African-American and Hispanic students and some of their white and Asian-American peers, Subin said.

"I'm frustrated in the fact that we were never able to really get across until now that the achievement gap is not simply a schools problem," he said. County officials plan to convene a group on at-risk children. The group will include representatives from the departments of Health and Human Services and Juvenile Services, the school system and law enforcement agencies.

"While the school system needs to play its role and to help identify those kids and work within their means, they can't do it alone," Subin said.

The growing demand for higher education presents perhaps the most pressing concern for the council, said Subin, who is a strong advocate of Montgomery College's open-enrollment policy.

"It's going to mean more funding for a greater percentage of full-time professors," he said. "The facilities

needs of the Rockville campus are extraordinary. Germantown is going to need to grow."

The college enrolls 55,000 students a year — including more than 22,000 full-time students — through both credit and noncredit programs, in more than 100 areas of study on its three campuses.

While the college is essential to the county's economic health, its needs are growing at a time when the county's economy is slowing, Subin said.

"I envy [the new council] for the challenges that they have and having to deal with them. And I don't envy them for it," he said. "It's going to be the old Chinese proverb, 'May you be cursed and live in interesting times.'"

Leadership

Leggett and the new council will face the normal administrative challenges and growing pains, but previous leadership has eased the transition, Denis said.

"I think Duncan and the rest of the [sitting] council has put us on a glide path with their good decisions," he said.

Part of that glide path includes a

good fiscal position, said Perez, who said the county can weather any potential economic downturn.

"We're fundamentally fiscally sound. One of Duncan's legacies is the continued triple-A bond rating," Perez said. "It's important not to overstate the doom and gloom."

For him, important jobs for the new administration will be developing more opportunities for minorities and redefining the county's image.

"Going outside Montgomery County, I learned that we have an image problem," Perez said. "There is a perception that we are a lily-white, affluent community with no needs. We are not reflective of the changing face of Montgomery County. My concern is that the people most affected by the decisions of the council are not at the table."

County leaders will have to make additional outreach efforts, such as community meetings and even door-to-door solicitations to get minorities more involved, Perez said.

"The role of local government is sometimes the only line of defense for communities. [Montgomery County] is blessed to have the capacity to invest in human capital in ways that

other jurisdictions are not," he said. "It's an exciting time to be in office."

The future

Like the council, the lives of the departing council members are in transition.

Denis, who said he would return full time to his Capitol Hill job as staff director for U.S. Rep. Thomas M. Davis III (R-Va.), is also serving on the transition team for Comptroller-elect Peter V.R. Franchot (D).

Subin, who applied for the Montgomery College presidency but was not chosen as a finalist, is busy with his law practice, but is also weighing other opportunities.

He and Perez, who was disqualified from the attorney general's race this year, are serving on Leggett's transition team. Perez also is teaching classes at University of Maryland Law School and plans to remain involved in state politics.

Silverman has not considered another run for political office, but he, too, is weighing opportunities.

"Four years is a lifetime away," he said. "I would like to remain active in the public arena... so, we'll see."